Gunnell, E. When she made six nesting. (1901)

A-G [Gunnel, E.]
Nesting
1901

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

LIBRARY

OF THE

MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOÖLOGY

58,109

BEQUEST OF

WALTER FAXON

December 10, 1921.

DEC 10 1921

WHEN THE BIRDS ARE NESTING.

BY

ELIZABETH GRINNELL.

THE LAND OF SUNSHINE, VOL. XV. NO. 1.
JULY, 1901.

58.109

When The Birds Are Nesting.

BY ELIZABETH GRINNELL.

N an area about fifty yards square adjoining our home, are enacted the incidents and scenes described. No home in this land of sunshine need be without similar associations. To plant a tree or shrub is to invite the birds. But tree and shrub must grow. Here are hints for those who bide the growing: A pile of fruit tree prunings, to be had for the asking and the bringing, may be made a great inducement. Boughs zigzag, little sticks interlacing, an uneven mesh of knotted filament usually condemned to the back yard gehenna, offer untold attractions to many of our birds. In this partial shelter they play hide-and-seek with their threaded shadows, feed upon insects which seek the spot for the same reasons as themselves, or "sit and think," as birds appear to do, at intervals during the day. If it's sufficiently dense, they may even sleep at night in the brush pile. To induce them to build, at nesting time, about a home whose vines have yet to grow, blue gum or pepper boughs thickly foliaged, fastened about the eaves or above the balcony, will prove acceptable to the linnets at least, perchance to the mockers. Berry boxes or cigar boxes nailed high up under the north eaves of house or stable tempt the phœbe birds. Of course the litter of brush-pile and dead foliage may horrify the lover of immaculate surroundings, but, perish the birds! For be it known that our birds despise the presence of the landscape gardener, with his lawn mower, and clipping machines, and pruning hooks. They fly from his art as from a plague, and hie them to the wild, helter-skelter, half-untidy dooryard of the less artistic but more fervent bird lover.

One November day, when the winds played havoc among our trees, a great pine was pushed from its moorings and leaned far to the south. Its roots like a many fingered hand lost clutch of the soil, and pointed reproachfully skyward. "Cut it up," said the woodchopper. "It is only fit to burn, and pine makes good fire wood. The roots are especially rich."

A mocking-bird alighted on what had been its tufted apex and sent regretful glances through the bearded boughs. That glance gave us a suggestion. A house-mover came. A cluck to his horses and a click of the pulley chain, and the last reluctant earth-born tendril let go its hold. The great root was severed from the main trunk a few feet from the point of incorporation, and lo, a thing of beauty! Of tint like the deepest redwood, elbowed, gnarled, with bark like bits of raveled silk, this underground octopus was just what we had wanted. The stem was buried, holding the root aloft, in the front yard ten feet from the window. Visitors lifted their hands in wonder. The birds also wondered. From wondering they ventured, and from venturing they loved. An Australian pea vine was planted at its base and soon crowned its pinnacled summit.

This leafless tree became our Bird's Commercial House. Among the roots we tangled all sorts of nesting materials, big and little strings, last year's fluffy pampas plumes, lichens from arroyo witch-nooks, strips of rag, soft and old, hair combings left over from the stable currycomb, and—happiest thought of all—white, downy, surgeon's cotton. Now this cotton has turned the head of every bird attracted to it. The earliest to nest was the hummer, and she had the choice of materials. Nothing was suitable until she was ready for the lining. She poised above the cotton with slender black beak, and tore the gossamer apart like strands of spider's web. So fascinated

was she by the new fabric that she lined the nest far above the rim, and rebuilt the outer to fit the inner. With the cotton web she mingled bits of pampas feathers.

Next in turn came the bushtit. The smallest of all the birds save the hummer; this little tit showed us how she can form the largest nest of any in comparison with the size of the builder. Like the hummer, she used little of our material until ready for the lining. Then she lost her wits over the cotton. She pulled it to bits and looked to see it fly away in the wind. She thrust her head far into the snowy billow of it and covered herself. She flew with it dripping from her beak, and left a trail from branch to branch of the nearest tree. She snatched it from the linnet if this bird essayed to take a portion. She packed it into the bottom of her pocket nest far above the usual limits of the lining. She crept up and down the outside and peeped in at the round doorway with keenest satisfaction. She chatted about that cotton to her little gray lord, who also made hearty comments. But alas for the "best laid schemes." It was absorbent cotton: There came a March rain and blew directly in at the open door of that bushtit's nest. In a few hours we knew it was

Bushtit's Nest.

deserted. With guilty speculations we looked in and beheld three little unclothed babies lying snug in a pool of rain water.

That was a year ago, but Madame Bushtit still carries the cotton at nesting time, though we substituted cotton batting for the absorbent kind. A yellow warbler was induced to nest on the grounds, from the pine root bait we set. She took cotton only, and day by day in a crotch of the pepper the little white pile grew and spread out, its extreme whiteness contrasting well with the lemon yellow of the beautiful bird. When it was done she lined the cup with grey hairs from the combings of a certain lady who will not waste so trivial a thing. If the birds want it, give it to them! Time is so kind to turn one's brown hair white to make the lining of a yellow warbler's nest!

The mockers and the towhees each take what they can find in the commercial house, excepting the cotton. They go dragging strings and white rags across the grass, looking behind them for a possible end, and trying to manage altogether too much at a time.

Sweet little black-headed phœbe, who would come right in at the

ORIOLE'S NEST, WITH MODERN "LEAN-TO."

door after stray house flies but for the wire screens—she cares for nothing at the pine store. She wants mud. We have not seen more than one nest under the same eaves, though we have set our cigar box traps year by year. Phœbe drives away the swallows if they chance along, and even her own people are repulsed. She has built her house low under the north eaves for years. We leave the hydrant adrip on purpose for phœbe. But it is not mud alone that allures her. The ground is full of little rootlets that travel long distances for a drink and emerge at the surface greedy for the precious moisture. Phœbe mixes the rootlets with the mud and so makes a respectable mortar that lasts. She began lining the nest with bits from the jute door-mat. We raveled the ends on purpose, of course. Nothing that birds can have possible use for is thrown into the fire at our house. We thought this jute stuff a trifle harsh, so we threw down some fur from a grizzly bear skin. Phœbe liked the looks of

Nest of Black-headed Grosbeak, in Fork of Fig Tree.

it and was swinging her usually slow gait close to the ground when a flock of intermediate sparrows caught sight of it. Now these visiting sparrows nest far north where grizzly bear nest-lining may be picked in any quantity from tree trunks where the moulting animals have rubbed. Either the memory of the sparrows was roused at the sight, or they forgot for the moment they were far from their nesting place. They made a dash for the familiar brown fur. They pecked mouthfuls of it, and dropped it, picked it up and tossed it. Then phœbe gave a wail, the usual plaintive cry which she imagines is a song, and there came a hand to hand fight for the fur. The sparrows retreated to the fence where they talked the matter over.

At this writing, March 8, phœbe is brooding above three shirtless infants, on the fifth-floor flat under the stable eaves. Year by year she makes a new layer of adobe, loving the spot, though we handle the birdlings, while she nips at our shoulders and hair. She knows we will not harm them. One time the linnet stole the nest when phœbe wasn't looking and laid her own eggs in it. Phœbe used all the terms of the law to oust her rival but linnet wouldn't budge. Phœbe brought her husband, and together they pulled at linnet's shoulder, to no avail. Old man phœbe left the scene in disgust, while mother phœbe had to wait her turn for the next possession.

The phœbes' nest is always of dark stuff, as also is the only nest of the black-headed grosbeak we have seen in our grounds. This beautiful singer lingered about till mid-summer and then concluded to stay the year out. By being out among the trees in advance of the first sunbeam we discovered the nest in an elbow of the fig-tree. It was made of dark little sticks, or last year's stems of fig leaves, and so transparent that we could see the eggs distinctly while looking up from beneath. Not a bit of soft lining, just black sticks laid criss-cross. It was as if the builder knew that, being mid-summer and in the most delightful climate in the world, ventilation was the sanitary order.

The oriole comes early, examining the tender new leaves of the frost-bitten banana, regretfully leaving them for the blue gum, after satisfying herself that they are too immature for her hammock. The banana leaves will ripen in time for the next brood. In the blue gum she built a lean-to by the side of last year's nest, and attached to it, of the palm fiber, which is her delight, and which we often strip for her and lay in tempting spread on our commercial counter. The present addition to her previous nest is yellow and fresh while that of last year is weather beaten and mildewed.

Except September, October and November, every month in the year is nesting time with us, When the late peaches turn their rosiest cheek to the autumn sun, and the almond husk opens its pale lips, then are the structures which were so lately the center of solicitude tenantless and neglected. Old birds in passing take no notice of them and the hungry juveniles pay no visible heed. What care they for cradles, now that their sole cry is the universal "Bread and butter, please?" Baby zephyrs nap on the worn-out lining, and the rain runs its slim fingers through the parting meshes. Even the domestic feline, who was wont to inquire into the heart of every bunch of grass and twigs, no longer wastes time in study of the nesting habits of birds. She will resume her investigations next year, provided she falls not a victim to the single barrel Remington behind the door.

Pasadena, Cal.

Photo. by Lee Moorehouse, Pendleton, Ore.

SHE DREAMS

BY MARY H. COATES.

She dreams all day out in the sun,
And gathers to her, one by one,
    Each bygone season ; heat and snow
    From dim wild glade and bold plateau
She calls and counts them all, and none
Escape her beck, none does she shun ;
    Of days wee-tee-tash,— long ago
        She dreams.

Snug in a brilliant blanket spun
From finest wool ; her warm thoughts run
    In channels weird, till phantoms flow
    In stirring deeds of friend and foe ;
Of times and scenes that now are done
        She dreams.

Santa Cruz, Cal.